THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON ONLINE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR FOR THE BOOK MARKET IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, along with the social distancing rules imposed by governments around the world, have caused major changes in the publishing industry and, therefore, in the book consumption patterns. The main goal of this paper is to identify the changes in the purchasing habits of book consumers within two different frameworks of motivations: utilitarian and hedonic – both studied during the COVID-19 pandemic. A model was developed to study the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as a circumstantial impact, because it implicated the temporary shutdown of physical bookshops, the uncertainty of contracting the virus by visiting the shops once they re-opened along with the upgrades that online bookshops developed during the pandemic to attract customers. Data were gathered from 410 Romanian consumers by applying an online survey. Multivariate data analysis applied to the model showed that the COVID-19 pandemic context had a positive and significant influence on the customers' intents of online book purchasing. Moreover, while hedonic reasons exerted a compelling influence on the customers' intents to buy books online, the association between utilitarian reasons and online buying intents is positive, but insignificant. These results could support all stakeholders within the book market, such as publishing firms and online bookshops to strengthen their online presence – to develop their websites, their social media pages, as well as expand their advertising operations through different channels. The outcomes of this research are important and useful also for the academic environment, as the changes within the book market and the evolution of book consumption behavior influence research and academic writing overall.

Keywords: Customer shopping preferences, pandemic, COVID-19, online bookshops, hedonic, utilitarian reasons.

JEL Classification: L81, L11, D91.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedent crisis for SMEs and challenged each single enterprise to reconsider its business operations and to adapt to the new unexpected circumstances (Caballero-Morales, 2021). Also the humankind finds itself facing unparalleled situation since the worldwide outbreak of the COVID-19 created significant changes in societies worldwide (Veselovská et al., 2021). This pandemic will have considerable outcomes on essential stakeholders in the publishing industry as well. Taking into consideration that physical book shops were constrained to cease activities for a period of time, and that customers may not be willing to physically visit

bookshops due to health cautiousness, the trend of online book purchasing has increased rapidly in a short period of time. There is, consequently, a pressing urgency for publishing houses and book selling companies to enhance and strengthen their presence within the digital market (Dincă et al., 2020). Stakeholders should also focus on conceiving productive advertising plans pointing at understanding book shopping attitudes and customer motivations for online book purchases as consumer behavior in general is becoming more and more influenced by digital tools (Andrei et al., 2021; Vasiliu, 2022) and more preoccupied by sustainability and preservation of resources (Georgescu et al., 2022).

The Romanian book sector is one of the strongest cultural sectors in the economy when it comes to its economic impact and job creation, holding a decisive role for the intellectual capital of the society (Becuț, 2016; Scarlat & Scănciulescu, 2021). Apart from its economic value, it is also significant because all the members of the community have effortless access to a wide variety of books. For the book industry, just like for many other sectors, the COVID-19 critical point is uncommon and unmatched. No other previous crisis has altered to such proportions not just the entire value chain from novelists or playwrights to editors, but also its consumers, the book buyers, not only in Romania, but in almost all EU states. The processes of creating, manufacturing, distributing, advertising and selling books were nearly at deadlock for days, while readers were affected by restrictions to stay home, therefore having more time to read but less access to books. The booksellers who succeeded to maintain their sales during the pandemic were those that reinforced their online presence and who found clever and original methods to still communicate well with the consumers through online promotional campaigns delivered as well (Turrin & Balduzzi, 2020).

Even though it is difficult to detail the repercussions and assess the effects of such a crisis at national level, this scientific paper aims at examining how the Romanian book consumers have adapted their behavior of book shopping and what fresh business models could evolve from these changes. The findings can be useful for all the actors within the book market, but most of all for book publishers and booksellers in order for them to understand new patterns of consumer behavior and, therefore, to maintain customer loyalty and build a more solid online presence.

1. Theoretical Background

From a general point of view the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on consumers' economic expectations and their purchasing behavior is still to be investigated further on. A study developed by Veselovská et al. (2021) proved that the changes created by the COVID-19 pandemic in consumer behavior were significant in this period, especially for women and the importance of personal factors significantly decreased, whereas the influences of social and psychological factors increased. Therefore the rapid modifications of consumer behavior determine companies to identify efficient and fast coping strategies (Veselovska, 2021). For example, Eger et al. (2022) carried out a study showing how companies in the era of post-COVID-19 are using brand communities on social media influence consumers' intention to purchase through online interactivity, responsiveness, and personalization.

Referring to the main topic of our research – book purchasing behavior – even though online book shopping has spread immensely in the last decade at a global level, literature on the topic is scarce regarding the determinants that influence consumer online book shopping. A noteworthy and very recent research elaborated by Bourne (2021) showed that attractive prices, the assortment of items, the accessibility and quickness of delivery are dominant characteristics of customer culture related to online book purchasing.

Purchasing reasons are described as personal motivations or catalysts supporting people's actions that stimulate customers to respond their existent necessities (Renteria-Garcia et al., 2019). Reasons for digital purchases are both utilitarian and hedonic. While utilitarian reasons refer to hopes and outcomes, hedonic reasons are described as the pleasure experience of shopping (Cai et al., 2018). Therefore, customers can be stimulated to partake in virtual purchases for reasons related to utility and/or the entertainment of shopping. In 2020, Nguyen et al. developed another research to examine customers' reasons for buying books digitally with a sample of 275 Vietnamese consumers with utilitarian reasons exerting the strongest effect on online

shopping intention within their study (Nguyen et al., 2020).

Determinants associated with circumstantial features, which contain all elements that do not associate to the decision-maker as personal (e.g., personality and physical properties) or to the choice options, hold an important place and consolidate digital purchasing reasons. Those determinants can stimulate or, on the contrary, lower the periodicity of digital purchases (Ionescu et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2020). Relating to the context of 2021 it can be acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic is a very complex phenomenon because it generated unexpected crises in the national health systems, economic systems, educational systems, cultural systems, sports systems, and social systems (Brătianu, 2020). There are not many studies developed on how different contexts related to circumstances affect online book shopping, but the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be a notable circumstantial determinant shifting the attitudes of customers towards digital book shopping.

Therefore, this article pursues to provide to the existing literature in the field an examination of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic context and customers' reasons on their decisions to purchase books online in Romania. The overall Romanian book market is estimated at 100–105 million euros, and in the period of 15 March–15 April, 2020, it decreased by 70% (Micu, 2020). Even though the traditional channels are still predominant, online bookselling has risen in Romania over the past 5 years. Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic started to spread, all book publishers and sellers have been reinventing themselves, some going more aggressively online, which is a move that will probably not compensate for the dramatic decline in the traditional book trade (Hrib, 2020). The winners seem to be those who were already well represented in this segment, such as Elefant.ro and Libris.ro, with the stipulation that Elephant is not a simple book seller, but an online mall with several product categories.

Based on the consensus that both utilitarianism and hedonism come into play in consumer shopping (Scarpi et al., 2014) and on the discussion on book shopping behavior and its associated characteristics, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The COVID-19 pandemic context positively and significantly impacts the online book shopping intent of customers.

H2: Utilitarian shopping motivations positively and significantly impact the online book shopping intent of customers.

H3: Hedonic shopping motivations positively and significantly impact the online book shopping intent of customers.

The outcomes of this research will deepen the present perception about online book purchases in developing markets such as Romania, and also provide marketing insights for publishing houses and digital book retailers running on this market.

The article continues after this section with a depiction of the methodology with variables, the data collection process and the sample representation. Afterwards, data analysis with descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis and multiple regression are provided, followed by an advanced discussion of the results and their meaning. In the end, forthcoming research perspectives are shared.

2. Research Methodology
2.1 Variables

The most part of the items assessing the four variables of the model taken into account in this research were chosen and adjusted from previous other studies on the online shopping topic, but they were adapted to the book market features. A study carried out by Nguyen et al. (2020) was used to draw the five items representing the first independent variable of the model: the circumstantial impact of the COVID-19. Three items scaling the second independent variable (the utilitarian reasons) and other three representing the third independent variable (the hedonic reasons) were taken from a study developed by Novela et al. (2020). To appraise the dependent variable of the model – the buyers' target to purchase books digitally – four items were adjusted from the same study carried out by Nguyen et al. (2020). All the items of the four variables were rated by a five-point Likert scale, which went from (1) 'Strongly disagree' to (5) 'Strongly agree'. Thirty customers were involved in the pilot test performed to verify the clearness and significance of the items.

2.2 Data Collection and Sample

Data were gathered from buyers who were older than 18 years old and who had the intention to buy books online in the previous month and

an online survey was applied to collect all the data. Two testing questions (related to being a regular book reader and shopper) were asked to include only eligible participants within the study and the sampling method used for the online survey was non-probability snowball sampling. The authors sent the link of the online survey, created with Google form, to 450 potential participants of the study and within a month of data collection (in October 2021), a number of 410 full questionnaires were responded.

From the 410 participants included in the study, 59% were women while 41% were men. When it comes to age 32% were between 18 and 25 years old, 43% were between 26 and 35 years old, 18% were between 36 and 45 years old, and 7% were above 46 years old. Moreover, 86% graduated a university degree,

whereas 14% did not but held a baccalaureate diploma (completed high school education). The monthly revenue of our respondents ranged from: 2,500 lei and under (21%), 2,501–4,000 lei (32%), 4,001–5,500 lei (25%), and 5,501 lei and above (22%).

3. Research Results
3.1 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Tests

The ultimate values of the variables were generated by computing the average across the individual values. Out of the four constructs, the circumstantial impact recorded the biggest mean value (mean = 4.59 and standard deviation = 0.91). Most of all, customers firmly revealed that in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic they were disappointed with book shops being closed, and this was the first

Tab. 1: Descriptive statistics of the four constructs of the model and their items

Constructs with their respective variables	Mean	Standard deviation
1. Circumstantial impact (CI; Cronbach's alpha α = 0.781)	4.59	0.91
CI1 Multiple physical bookshops stopped functioning (or shortened opening hours) during the COVID-19 Pandemic.	4.72	1.14
CI2 Uncertainty regarding contracting the virus is connected with visiting physical bookshops.	4.58	1.17
CI3 E-bookshops developed their product range during the COVID-19 pandemic.	4.42	0.98
CI4 E-bookshops provided more discounts during the COVID-19 pandemic.	4.69	0.99
CI5 Even though some physical bookshops resumed a part of their activity after the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, I now prefer buying books online.	4.54	1.11
2. Utilitarian reasons (U; Cronbach's alpha α = 0.762)	4.23	0.93
U1 Book e-shopping is convenient.	4.12	0.87
U2 Book e-shopping is easy to do.	4.27	0.94
U3 Book e-shopping is advantageous.	4.30	1.22
3. Hedonic reasons (H; Cronbach's alpha α = 0.755)	4.19	1.05
H1 Book e-shopping is enjoyable.	4.26	1.17
H2 Book e-shopping makes me feel happy.	4.17	0.92
H3 Book e-shopping gives me positive energy.	4.14	0.84
4. E-shopping intent (ESI; Cronbach's alpha α = 0.713)	4.36	1.32
ESI1 I will purchase books online next week.	4.29	1.21
ESI2 I will purchase books online next month.	4.41	0.95
ESI3 I am decided to purchase books online in the near future.	4.38	1.03

Source: own

factor that determined them to find alternative ways to buy books (mean = 4.72, standard deviation = 1.14). At the same time, the participants also firmly affirmed that discounts provided by online bookshops during the COVID-19 pandemic attracted them to turn more and more to online bookshops (this factor also holding a large mean of 4.69).

Reliability analysis was also performed because it allows researchers to study the properties of measurement scales and the items that compose the scales. By using reliability analysis, one can determine the extent to which the items in the questionnaire are related to each other, get an overall index of the repeatability or internal consistency of the scale as a whole, and identify problem items that should be excluded from the scale (Ursachi et al., 2015).

In this particular research, reliability analysis was carried out by applying Cronbach's alpha. Tab. 1 reveals that Cronbach's alpha values spanned from 0.713 (for the e-shopping intent factor) to 0.781 (for the circumstantial impact), and we should consider that numerous authors follow a rule-of-thumb that alpha should reach 0.70 for an instrument to have a good level of self-consistency (Choa & Chun, 2018). Also, corrected item-to-total correlations all recorded values higher than 0.55. One can settle that the model of this study and its factors hold a high level of internal consistency and

reliability (Cortina, 1993). The outcomes of the descriptive statistics and reliability tests are shown in Tab. 1.

3.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis

By applying the Promax rotation method we performed an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) handling principal axis factoring for the items embedded within the three independent constructs: circumstantial impact, utilitarian reasons and hedonic reasons.

The outcomes showed that the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin result was 0.917 (indicating that the sample is adequate because the value is placed in the interval of 0.8 and 1 (Dodge, 2008) while the Bartlett's test was relevant with 0.001 level, implying that the findings were solid for executing an exploratory factor analysis (Snedecor & Cochran, 1989).

It was anticipated that three factors would be withdrawn, and they valued approximately 62% of the total variance set out. Tab. 2 above reveals that all factors loadings recorded values higher than 0.6. Given that loadings close to 1 indicate that the factor strongly influences the variable and that loadings close to 0 indicate that the factor has a weak influence on the variable, it results that the values recorded by our model would be considered strong associations for a factor analysis in most research fields (Widaman, 1993).

Tab. 2: Outcomes of the exploratory factor analysis per construct

Items	Construct 1	Construct 2	Construct 3
C1	0.625		
C2	0.647		
C3	0.748		
C4	0.713		
C5	0.796		
U1		0.659	
U2		0.786	
U3		0.735	
H1			0.875
H2			0.761
H3			0.742

Source: own

3.3 Bivariate Correlation and Multiple Regression Analysis

The investigation continued by completing a bivariate correlation analysis in order to review the link between the variables. Tab. 3 indicates that the intent to shop books online is linked in a positive way with the circumstantial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic ($r = 0.741$; $p < 0.01$), the utilitarian reasons ($r = 0.346$; $p < 0.01$) and the hedonic reasons ($r = 0.832$; $p < 0.01$).

Afterwards, multiple regression analysis was lead to test the hypotheses and, therefore, to inquire into the impact of the three forecasting variables on the customers' intent of purchasing books online. The premises of the regression process were validated with the application of boxplots, scatterplots, tolerance value and variance inflation factor (Ullman, 2001). The findings unveiled that the basis of linearity and homoscedasticity was accomplished, while the values for multivariate outliers and multicollinearity do not constitute an issue that could affect the model (Vermunt & Magidson, 2005).

The results of the multiple regression analysis (presented in Tab. 3) showed that circumstantial impact ($\beta = 0.257$; $p < 0.01$) and the hedonic reasons ($\beta = 0.621$; $p < 0.001$) were positively and substantially influencing the customers' intent to shop books online, which confirms both *H1* and *H3*.

The effect of utilitarian reasons on the dependent construct – the e-shopping intent for books was also positive, but insignificant ($\beta = 0.081$; $p > 0.05$), which does not confirm *H2* in its entirety (the effect is positive, but not significant).

Judging the whole mix of constructs along with their respective items, the three forecast variables (circumstantial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, utilitarian reasons and hedonic reasons) expressed a powerful 71.7% of the variation in the e-shopping of books online with $R^2 = 0.717$, $p < 0.001$. Throughout the forecasting variables, the standardized regression coefficients uncovered that hedonic reasons ($\beta = 0.621$) enforced the biggest influence on the intent of online shopping of books, followed by the circumstantial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic ($\beta = 0.257$) and utilitarian reasons ($\beta = 0.081$), respectively.

Not many studies on the determinants influencing the online purchase of books have been developed so far therefore the outcomes of this research try to fill in the research gap of changes within book consumer behavior caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this research sets a starting point for this particular topic, i.e., the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on customers' intent to shop books online, by devising a model to associate these consequences to the circumstantial context given by the pandemic. Moreover, it has analyzed the aftermath of utilitarian and hedonic reasons when forecasting customers' intention of purchasing books online. This article also refers to the publications focused on online purchases and book shopping attitudes in developing countries because it concentrates on the Romanian market. It is worth mentioning that Romania represents a significant economy from Eastern Europe (Dincă et al., 2019) and stands out as a substantial market opportunity for both local and international companies from the book and publishing industry (Iancu, 2020).

The results of this research bring forth that the COVID-19 pandemic context has a positive and notable influence on the customers' intents to shop books online. It was extensively commented in the media that the impact of the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic implicated that: physical shops, including

Tab. 3: Findings of the bivariate correlation and the multiple regression processes

Independent constructs	Correlation with the e-shopping intent	Multiple regression variables	
	r	B	β
Circumstantial impact	0.741*	0.479	0.257*
Utilitarian reasons	0.346*	0.052	0.081[ns]
Hedonic reasons	0.832*	0.638	0.621**

Source: own

Note: *$p < 0.01$; **$p < 0.001$; ns = nonsignificant.

bookshops, stopped functioning for the public and the uncertainty of the population regarding contracting the virus following the visit of the shops once they reopened grew considerably (Iancu, 2020). The outcomes of this paper corroborate the results of Fernandes et al. (2021) who identified that online bookshops perceived this context as an opportunity to raise their competitive advantage on the market and they took measures to attract customers such as extending their product range and providing more discounts during this period (Fernandes et al., 2021). This article's results also confirm the findings of Martins and Lins (2022) who stated that these changes contributed to the fact that even though some physical bookshops resumed part of their activity after the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, many consumers even now in early 2022 prefer buying books online and all these determinants will renew the customers' prospects to purchase books through different online platforms (Martins & Lins, 2022).

The outcomes also proved that the circumstantial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic represents the most consistent forecasting variable regarding the customers' intent in purchasing books online (confirming also *H1* of our study). This translates that consumers were stimulated to intensify their online purchases of books by the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic. What draws attention is that the influence of the utilitarian reasons on online buying purchase intents is positively correlated, but insignificant (therefore *H2* was not confirmed). This means that the utilitarian motives, in contrast to the hedonic reasons (which influence was significant confirming *H3*), are less influential in forecasting the online buying intents. A likely interpretation is that most part of the consumers is affected emotionally by the COVID-19 pandemic circumstances. Consequently, their purchases of books online are more influenced by the good enthusiasm and agreeable vibes connected with the specific act of buying.

The results of this research have major practical significance for companies within the book publishing and online selling industry especially because of the scarcity of recent similar studies. Taking into consideration the meaningful effect of the COVID-19 pandemic circumstances on buying behavior of consumers, online book selling firms should do their utmost to build up their product selection on their websites while offering customers more sales discounts. For instance, publishing firms and online bookshops can initiate distinctive book assortment for children and young adults. Bonuses for used books, free shipping for a certain amount of money spent, extra discounts for additional books bought from the same seller, coupons for certain festive days, are all advertising offers that can be provided to boost the sales of online bookshops. In addition, a dialogue plan (involving social media and internet tools) with the customers should be implemented, including reminders that shopping for books online is exempted of health risks linked to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taking into account the noteworthy role of the hedonic reasons in describing the purchase intents, it would be very beneficial for online bookshops to improve the customers' pleasure and fun related to their online purchases by offering them new and original digital properties, adaptability and openness in exploring the websites. Despite the fact that utilitarian reasons were not so significant in interpreting the online shopping intents, companies involved in online book purchases should make an effort to upgrade the practicality and usefulness of their websites. Concerning this point, it is relevant to enrich the approachability and convenience of the websites, purchase convenience, various payment techniques with feedback and research operations. Necessarily, advertising methods should concentrate on underlining both utilitarian and hedonic values of online book purchasing.

Conclusions

Forthcoming research studies can broaden and enrich the current article in different directions. The ultimate fixed sample in this article may be affected because of using the method of snowball sampling. Future research should correct this shortcoming by applying probability techniques like simple random sampling. The sample included participants who had a particular interest in reading, purchasing books and in various online tools for buying books, therefore it is difficult to generalize the result outside this chosen sample. Also this research was conducted in Romania, deliberating on Romania's social and cultural characteristics and Romania's book market. These aspects are not necessarily or entirely similar with those

from other states and consequently exploiting the results on other geographical areas should be done carefully.

Moreover, prospective studies can improve this research by adding more hypothetical forecasting variables of customers' intents for online book purchasing related to the personal and cultural values of the customers.

At the same time, if we refer to the specific topic of our study, the only aspect which is obvious at the beginning of the year 2022 is that the Romanian book sector took a severe contraction due to the COVID-19 pandemic, of which the exact caliber is not so well defined. The book value chain has certainly been hit and the ramifications of this critical situation will shape the book market for months and maybe years. Therefore, it is important for the key players in the book industry to find alternative ways to repair the damages and rebuild their future by expanding in the online environment, and to find out more about the attitudes and the expectations of online book consumers.

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